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KINCARDINE TOURISM: VALUE IN VISITORS

Robert Colquhoun wrote this case under the supervision of Julie Gosse solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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Kelly McDonald was the tourism coordinator at Kincardine Tourism. As of summer 2020, McDonald had held this position for over two decades and had witnessed the evolution of both the community and the tourism industry. At the outset of the 2020 tourism season, promotions were paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. McDonald now had time to prepare an integrated marketing plan to ensure that tourists would return to the area as developments concerning the pandemic allowed. Major key performance indicators included attracting more first-time visitors, reducing the effects of seasonality, and implementing and measuring the success of a cohesive promotional strategy.

BACKGROUND

Kincardine Tourism was the department of Kincardine’s municipal government primarily in charge of attracting visitors, distributing information, and organizing local events. McDonald worked closely with the municipal government and provided frequent updates and results to the municipality. Changes in elected government officials could result in unforeseen changes to the office’s budget.

McDonald was joined by two to four summer students during the busier months. The visitor information centre normally operated out of two locations: one on Highway 21 and a smaller satellite office on Queen Street, the town’s main downtown street.

The department operated in a highly seasonal industry; the number of visitors to the area nearly doubled during the third quarter of the year (July−September).[[1]](#footnote-1) In the winter, Kincardine was hit with extreme winter storms, which frequently led to highway closures. As a result, it was especially important for Kincardine Tourism to ensure that visitor numbers in the summer were met.

The offices were busy in the summer months with tourists looking for maps, suggestions, and accommodation. On top of this, the department managed the municipality’s weekly Market in the Park as well as many larger events such as the Gathering of the Bands, a Scottish music festival. McDonald and her team needed to plan effectively to ensure the marketing and promotion strategy was organized before the other responsibilities began demanding their time in the summer.

KINCARDINE, ONTARIO

Kincardine was a municipality located on the shores of Lake Huron in Bruce County, Ontario. Kincardine’s population as of summer 2020 was 11,665.[[2]](#footnote-2) Most of Kincardine’s businesses were small in scale, with 10 employees or less.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The town was within a three-hour drive from major metropolitan areas like Toronto and was relatively close to the Canada−US border crossing at Sarnia. Kincardine had a small airport, but it was not used regularly for commercial flights. While the town’s harbour had 14 transient slips, nearly all visitors arrived at Kincardine by car. Steady vehicular traffic passed through Kincardine on Highway 21, a major collector highway spanning from between Sarnia and London to Owen Sound. The busy highway traffic was separated from the downtown core based around Queen Street, which ran parallel to the highway. This separation allowed for a quaint downtown with more foot traffic for the smaller, locally owned stores.

The most influential contributor to the county’s economy was the Bruce Power Nuclear Generating Station (Bruce Power). The nuclear power station was the largest operational plant in the world and employed over 4,000 people.[[4]](#footnote-4) As a result, many of the businesses in the area were service-based and appealed to Bruce Power’s employees and their families. The variety of restaurants, bars, experiences, and events in the area equally appealed to the tourist market.

When surveyed, over 90 per cent of Bruce County visitors mentioned that they were likely to visit the county again the following year, highlighting the importance of attracting new visitors.[[5]](#footnote-5) Not only would these new visitors bolster promotional efforts through word of mouth, they would also likely return at least once more in the future.

Through the years, Kincardine Tourism had promoted the town in a variety of different print and digital publications. Geographically, most of the advertisements tended to target those already living in southern Ontario. Larger markets, such as the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and US cities, were attractive, but due to an abundance of advertising demand, prices were often prohibitively high. While previous methods seemed to have been effective, McDonald was always looking for new ways to track the actual effect these advertisements had and how many tourists were being brought to the town as a result.

THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

Seventy-four per cent of overnight stays in Ontario were from residents travelling within their home province, taking what was sometimes referred to as a “staycation.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Thirty-five per cent of tourism spending in Canada occurred in Ontario, which accumulated over CA$36 billion[[7]](#footnote-7) in tourism receipts each year.[[8]](#footnote-8) The tourism industry was crucial to Ontario’s economy, representing 4.4 per cent of Ontario’s gross domestic product and directly supporting over 400,000 jobs.[[9]](#footnote-9)

During her tenure as tourism coordinator, McDonald had witnessed a myriad of unexpected challenges for the tourism industry. The COVID-19 pandemic as well as catastrophes such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, had resulted in a steep decrease in tourism. Even factors such as the weather in the summer could alter the attractiveness of Kincardine as a destination. McDonald had learned that while these factors were unpredictable, she could still capitalize on the times when tourism was attractive. The tourism industry required adaptation each year in order to stay relevant in the rapidly changing external environment.

Advances in technology were also having an impact on the industry. McDonald had noticed that more tourists tended to plan their entire journey online, including booking accommodation on rental platforms such as Airbnb. Whereas visitor information centres had once been a crucial stop for tourists to receive information, now maps, event details, and recommendations could all be found online. To keep up with this changing trend, Kincardine Tourism had recently launched a new website featuring the town’s shops, accommodations, and attractions.

TOURIST TYPES

Mellow Vacationers

Kincardine Tourism segmented the tourist base into five main categories, the first being mellow vacationers. People in this group were typically over the age of 55 and tended to be quiet and introverted. They were often working couples travelling without children and seeking rest and relaxation. This group might attend events but preferred relaxed and laid-back experiences. This group appeared to consume most media through traditional mediums such as newspapers and magazines.

Social Boomers

The second category was social boomers. People in this group were also, on average, 55 years old. Social boomers included outgoing couples who craved engaging entertainment. They vacationed often, with some preferring international vacations and others preferring to stay closer to home. When choosing a destination, this social boomers favoured locations that offered a lively atmosphere and unique experiences. These couples tended to be retired, with above-average household incomes.

Memory Makers

Memory makers were composed primarily of young families. This group included couples between the ages of 35 and 50, with children under the age of 18. This group hoped to create lasting memories on their trip through fun experiences. Compared to the older groups, memory makers were more Internet savvy and more likely to carry out Internet research before making their travel choices.

Millennials

While both Kincardine residents and visitors to the town tended to skew toward the older age range, an opportunity existed to attract a greater number of millennials between the ages of 24 and 39. This demographic tended to travel either in couples or in larger friend groups of four or more. Millennials were looking for engaging experiences and to meet new people. One issue in attracting millennials was that Kincardine was not traditionally known for its nightlife; it was only in recent years that new breweries, pubs, and other venues had opened in the area to appeal to a younger demographic.

Americans

Inbound visits from US tourists varied widely based on macroeconomic factors such as the relationship between the Canadian dollar and the US dollar. For instance, total visits to Canada by Americans had declined from over 10 million visitors in the early 2000s to closer to five million in the latter half of the 2010s.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, as of summer 2020, the US dollar–Canadian dollar exchange rate was around 1.34 (meaning that US$1 was equivalent to CA$1.34), and with such a favourable exchange rate, many Americans could travel to Canada and enjoy their trip with relatively more purchasing power than they would have in their home country. Unfortunately, data was sparse regarding the characteristics of US visitors to Ontario. McDonald assumed, however, that the aforementioned segments would be similarly represented in US visitors.

Historically, Bruce Power hired a significant number of American employees to work temporarily on projects at its site. This resulted in American families travelling to the area to visit family members. No promotion plan had been targeted directly toward the American demographic recently, as word of mouth had seemed to be working effectively.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

The annual economic impact of tourism in Bruce County was estimated to be over $299 million.[[11]](#footnote-11) With Bruce County boasting other popular tourist destinations such as Bruce Peninsula National Park, the importance of the tourism industry’s impact on the region’s economy was hard to ignore.

To determine the feasibility of her marketing initiatives, McDonald would need to estimate the relative economic impact of one tourist visiting Kincardine. To do so, data was collected, and the low and high daily tourist spending habits for hotels, retail, food, and events were estimated (see Exhibit 1). To estimate the inherent “value” of a tourist, McDonald would need to estimate the tourist’s daily spending and their time spent in Kincardine. McDonald wondered if tourists were responsible for other spending effects that had not yet even been considered.

Forty-five per cent of total visitors stayed in the region overnight.[[12]](#footnote-12) Further, 30 per cent of those visitors stayed in the home of a friend or family member, thereby not paying for a local room.[[13]](#footnote-13) The remainder contributed to the economy by staying at a hotel, motel, campsite, bed and breakfast, rental cottage, or Airbnb rental. Of those overnight trips, visitors stayed an average of 2.87 nights (see Exhibit 2). Typically, a room was shared by two people travelling together.[[14]](#footnote-14) The daily rate for accommodation ranged from around $80 at the lower end to $180 and above for rooms at brand-name hotels and boutique inns.

COMPETITION

Goderich

Goderich was 52 kilometres south of Kincardine and marketed itself as the “Prettiest Town in Canada.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Goderich was home to the only deepwater port on the east shore of Lake Huron.[[16]](#footnote-16) This port serviced over 250 commercial ships per year,[[17]](#footnote-17) loading and shipping commodities such as salt from the Goderich salt mine, the largest underground salt mine in the world.[[18]](#footnote-18) Despite this, Goderich still had fewer branded hotels and accommodations than Kincardine. The town’s downtown core was centred around its scenic and quaint Courthouse Square, which hosted weekly markets and outdoor concerts and was home to specialty shops and numerous restaurants. Goderich’s most buzzed about event was the Celtic Roots Festival, which occurred annually in late summer. In comparison to Kincardine, Goderich hosted fewer widely attended community events. The town also tended to promote its scenery and location over its culture and heritage.

Saugeen Shores

Saugeen Shores was 24 kilometres north of Kincardine and included the towns of Port Elgin and Southampton. Like Kincardine, Saugeen Shores promoted its expansive trail system and sandy beaches. Its festivals and attractions also tended to attract a similar demographic. One of Port Elgin’s most popular events was Pumpkinfest, which celebrated the area’s agriculture each October. Southampton was home to the Bruce County Museum & Cultural Centre, a popular stop for families with younger children.

With a population that was also composed largely of Bruce Power employees, Saugeen Shores had similar stores and service-based businesses to Kincardine. One main distinguishing factor was that Southampton and Port Elgin both used Highway 21 as their main street. This offered much more exposure to their downtown businesses but perhaps took away from the quaint and quiet aesthetic of the small towns. Since these towns also offered festivals, lighthouses, beaches, and shopping, McDonald wondered how best to differentiate Kincardine from its neighbours.

Goderich and Saugeen Shores were just two examples among the many small-town tourist destinations in the area. These destinations were not necessarily a threat, however; McDonald had learned that direct competition in the tourism industry did not always pose the same threat that competitors posed to a traditional goods or services organization. Neighbouring communities were also considered partners in the effort to attract tourists to the area. McDonald noted that tourists did not pay much attention to town lines and could easily stay in one town while visiting neighbouring towns for a day of shopping or activities. She wondered how this different perspective on the competition would change the way the market was perceived.

INDIRECT COMPETITION

International Vacations

When considering indirect competition, Kincardine as a municipality could potentially consider any city in the world as a competitor. International vacations were often longer and far more expensive, and required more planning than a nearby getaway. Since travellers had a limitless number of options in terms of places to visit, Kincardine Tourism required a clear definition of its target market and needed to promote the benefits of its small community over traditionally popular tourist destinations.

ALTERNATIVES

Promotion

While the advertising budget had not yet been finalized for the upcoming year, McDonald planned to spend between $20,000 and $30,000 across the following options.

*Daytripping*

*Daytripping* was a free travel tourism magazine distributed across southern Ontario. Content included information about antiques, gift shops, live theatre updates, tea rooms, bed and breakfasts, and museums.[[19]](#footnote-19)

*Daytripping* was printed on light newsprint and had many pages of content. As a result of its traditional medium, distribution, and content, the magazine was often read by an older audience. The magazine published five issues per year and was available for pickup at no cost from travel centres and tourism booths.[[20]](#footnote-20) If McDonald chose to pursue this option, she would purchase a 10-by-15-inch full-page advertisement at a cost of $1,965 per issue.

*Daytripping* printed nearly 230,000 copies of its magazine per year, nearly all of which were picked up. McDonald wondered what percentage of the readership would realistically visit Kincardine because of an advertisement they had seen. The magazine clearly favoured readers who went on day trips, but McDonald wondered if some of these readers would end up staying overnight in Kincardine.

*Escarpment* *Magazine*

*Escarpment* *Magazine* (*Escarpment*) reached 100,000 homes, shops, and restaurants around the local counties surrounding Kincardine⎯Simcoe, Bruce, and Grey.[[21]](#footnote-21) A full-page advertisement in this publication would cost Kincardine Tourism $2,500 per issue. The magazine was printed on high-quality glossy paper four times per year and was intended to stay in the readers’ homes for months at a time.[[22]](#footnote-22) *Escarpment* also delivered its 25,000 copies per issue to its distribution partners free of charge. *Escarpment* described its reader base as “well-travelled, educated and active, and passionate about life.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

The publication was spread over a variety of locations throughout these regions, but McDonald was especially interested in reaching the Collingwood and Blue Mountain areas, as these attracted visitors over both the summer and winter months. *Escarpment* could be an effective way to reach travellers from larger metropolitan areas such as the GTA without paying the higher fees required to advertise in their home cities directly. By placing its publication in private ski and golf clubs, *Escarpment* was able to reach members of these clubs who paid upwards of $30,000–$40,000 for their membership.[[24]](#footnote-24)

McDonald recognized an opportunity with these magazines, as both the *Daytripping* and *Escarpment* publications released new issues throughout the year. She wondered if altering her promotion and messaging based on the season would be worthwhile.

Facebook

Facebook had undergone a major shift in terms of functionality and usership since its inception, and McDonald wondered if it was still an effective advertising medium. Kincardine Tourism had over 5,000 “likes” on Facebook, and it posted daily updates on the platform regarding local festivals, events, and activities. Kincardine Tourism could choose to promote its posts to reach members outside of its existing network. Promoting through a cost-per-click model would cost $0.97 per click.[[25]](#footnote-25) McDonald had not yet finalized a spending limit but wondered if a budget of $10 per day for these advertisements would be an appropriate amount. Facebook could be used to display advertisements to a specific demographic, but McDonald would need to decide how to make sure the desired audience would see the post.

Billboards

Another promotional option with the ability to reach a wide range of consumers was billboards. Billboards in Ontario’s smaller cities were often cheaper than in larger cities, ranging in price from $1,000 to $2,500 per run.[[26]](#footnote-26) These ads were much more expensive in Toronto and the GTA, where each billboard could cost up to $5,000 per run.[[27]](#footnote-27) The benefit of this option was that these advertisements in the downtown core could reach tens or hundreds of thousands of impressions. Runs usually lasted around four weeks before they were replaced with a different advertisement. McDonald wondered if billboards would be an effective medium and, if so, how many should be planned for, when should they be implemented, who would design them, and how she would determine if the impressions were converting into tourists.

Billboards were an even more prominent form of advertising in the United States. McDonald researched the possibility of leasing digital billboard spots in Michigan. The advertisements would run in eight-second portions, with entire loops repeating every 64 seconds. Prices ranged from $1,377 for lower-density areas up to $4,698 for premium locations.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Product

Scottish Heritage

Every Saturday night during the summer months, Kincardine’s main street was closed to traffic to allow for the Kincardine Scottish Pipe Band to march down the street, followed by hundreds of tourists and locals alike. This tradition, dating back to 1948, was one of many examples of Kincardine’s pride in its Scottish culture and heritage.

During the summer, on every night besides Saturdays, a “Phantom Piper” played atop Kincardine’s lighthouse while the sun set. The tradition was inspired by a local tale of a piper leading a ship to shore with the sound of his pipes on a stormy night in 1856. The Kincardine Scottish Festival & Highland Games also attracted hordes of visitors to the town in late summer. This festival included three days and nights of music, shopping, competitions, and food and drink.

Promoting this heritage could help differentiate Kincardine from the neighbouring towns. Further, the events and traditions seemed to appeal to retirees looking for a cultural experience as well as young families looking for a fun and memorable time. If chosen as a main promotional point, McDonald wondered how these traditions could most effectively be marketed, and what other elements existed that could be tied into the Scottish theme.

The Beach

Kincardine was home to several sandy beaches, the most popular of which was Station Beach, located directly adjacent to Kincardine’s downtown core. This beach was a favourite for visitors of all ages because of its shallow water, wooden boardwalk, amenities, and iconic sunsets. The beach was even accessible to those with mobility issues, as it offered Mobi-mat rubberized mesh rollout mats and free use of a fully submersible beach wheelchair.

Perched beside the beach was Kincardine’s iconic lighthouse, which visitors could climb during a guided tour. Across from the lighthouse was the Walker House, Kincardine’s oldest building, constructed in 1850. Tourists could also enjoy a guided tour of this building and museum to learn more about the region’s history.

Kincardine’s beaches could offer guests either a relaxing getaway spot or an exciting adventure. Several local retailers offered stand-up paddle-board rentals, allowing visitors to glide along the shoreline. Also, Station Beach had been named one of the best surf spots in Canada.[[29]](#footnote-29) Surfers could often be seen catching waves in the shoulder seasons before and after summer. Although the waves tended to be difficult to predict and did not always last long, McDonald wondered if promoting this attraction could extend the town’s seasonal tourism period.

Other Attractions

There was no shortage of attractions that Kincardine could promote. Alongside the ever-prominent Scottish music, other music styles were beginning to draw people to Kincardine. The Lighthouse Blues Festival in July, for instance, attracted hundreds of fans and was named a Top 100 Festival and Event in Ontario.[[30]](#footnote-30) The Kincardine Summer Music Festival further promoted this theme with an annual concert series featuring jazz, classical, world, and chamber music.

Others could be attracted to Kincardine for its variety of locally owned boutique stores selling clothing, decor, and giftware. Another often forgotten but not insignificant reason for travel to the area was destination weddings. On summer nights, Kincardine residents often noticed happy couples celebrating their special day to the backdrop of the sun setting over Lake Huron. Weddings had a sizable impact on tourism, as the couples getting married often brought along many family members.

Price and Placement

Merchandise Sales

McDonald noticed that regardless of how long their stay was in the town, visitors would often search for a souvenir to commemorate and remember their trip. As a result, Kincardine Tourism began selling merchandise. The most popular selling items had been sweaters and T-shirts.

Historically, this merchandise had only been sold directly to the consumer from the visitor information centre office. To broaden the reach of this merchandise, Kincardine Tourism could begin selling these clothing items online or through local retailers. Any incremental profits attributed to these sales would contribute to Kincardine Tourism’s budget, allowing for more spending on promotions and events.

The sweaters and T-shirts cost Kincardine Tourism $28 and $10, respectively, and sold in nearly equal proportions. Typically, the sweaters were sold for $45 and the T-shirts were sold for $20. Kincardine Tourism could choose to integrate an online marketplace into its redesigned website. The design and set-up of this online marketplace would be outsourced and would cost around $5,000. It would cost $5 to ship a domestic order in Canada and around $10 to ship the clothing items to the United States. Kincardine Tourism would need to decide if there would be any price changes and who would pay for the shipping with this option.

Kincardine Tourism could also partner with businesses to sell its merchandise in local stores. McDonald estimated that local retailers would mark up the clothing by 50 per cent. If pursuing this option, McDonald would need to decide at what price to sell the clothing to the stores and how to convince retailers to carry the product. McDonald wondered if the increased exposure would be worth the potential increased cost to consumers and whether the change would have any negative consequences. Regardless of whether the distribution channel were changed, to coordinate with the rest of the marketing plan, Kincardine Tourism would still need to confirm what design to use for next year’s clothing order.

going forward

McDonald reflected on the unique marketing challenge facing Kincardine Tourism. Traditional marketing practices often focused on increasing the sales of physical goods. Instead of sending out products, Kincardine Tourism looked to bring in more people. With an integrated marketing plan focusing on product, pricing, placement, and promotional choices, McDonald was confident that many more visitors would have the opportunity to experience the charm of Kincardine before long.

EXHIBIT 1: DAILY TOURIST SPENDING ESTIMATES IN KINCARDINE (CA$)

| **Spending Type** | **Low** | **High** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Accommodation | $80 | $180 |
| Retail Stores | $10 | $90 |
| Food & Restaurants | $20 | $60 |
| Events & Experiences | $0 | $60 |

Source: Company files.

EXHIBIT 2: NUMBER OF NIGHTS SPENT IN KINCARDINE by OVERNIGHT VISITORS

Source: The County of Bruce, *Explore the Bruce: Economic Impact of Tourism Report 2019*, January 17, 2019, accessed August 1, 2020, https://brucecounty.on.ca/sites/default/files/file-upload/business/economic-impact-of-tourism-for-2019.pdf.

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